
HUME'S ASSESSMENT OF NATURAL RELIGION

--*Summing up*

Text source:

Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion,
part 12

RECALL: POSSIBLE GROUNDS FOR RELIGIOUS BELIEF

■ (1) FIDEISTIC RELIGION

- Belief, *self-consciously* without rational justification.

■ (2) RATIONAL RELIGION

- Where we provide reasons and arguments for our religious beliefs.

- (2a) REVEALED RELIGION

- Where we appeal to some historically specific revelation to justify our religious beliefs. (Of course, for this to be a rational, non-fideistic ground for belief, we will have to have adequate reasons for believing that our sources of revelation are indeed authentically divine.)

- (2b) NATURAL RELIGION

- We can know certain religious truths through general reason and argument, independently of any actual historical revelation.
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■ THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

- Hume seems to think that this is a complete failure, for the reasons set out by Cleanthes and Philo.

■ THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN

- Hume seems to think, as Philo suggests, that the force of this argument is much weaker than had traditionally been supposed: **there may be some analogy between a human designer and whatever caused the universe, but its an *extremely weak and tenuous* one.**
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PHILO'S FAMOUS (*HIGHLY QUALIFIED*) ACCEPTANCE OF THE DESIGN ARGUMENT

“If the whole of natural theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves itself, into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bears some remote analogy to human intelligence*: **If** this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication: **If** it afford no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance: And **if** the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no farther than to the human intelligence; and cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to the other qualities of mind: **If** this really be the case, what can the most inquisitive, contemplative and religious man do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs” (DCNR part 12, para. 32)

PHILO THINKS THAT THIS WEAKENS NATURAL
RELIGION TO THE POINT WHERE THE
DIFFERENCE WITH ATHEISM IS ‘MERELY VERBAL’:

- “That the dispute concerning theism ... is merely verbal, or perhaps, if possible, still more incurably ambiguous will appear upon the slightest inquiry. I ask the theist if he does not believe that there is a great and immeasurable, because incomprehensible, difference between the *human* and the *divine* mind: The more pious he is, the more will he assent to the affirmative, and the more he will be disposed to magnify the difference: He will even assert that the difference is of a nature which cannot be too much magnified. ...”

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PHILO: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN NATURAL RELIGION AND ATHEISM IS 'MERELY VERBAL'

(continued)

- "... I next turn to the atheist ... and I ask him whether, from the coherence and apparent [mutual ordering] in all the parts of the world, **there be not a certain degree of analogy among all the operations of nature** ... ; whether the rotting of a turnip, the generation of an animal, and the structure of human thought, be not energies that probably bear some remote analogy to one another: It is impossible he can deny it. Having obtained this concession, I push him still further in his retreat, and I ask him if it be not probable that **the principle which first arranged and still maintains order in this universe probably bears some remote inconceivable analogy to the other operations of nature and, among the rest, to the economy of human mind and thought.** However reluctant, he must give his assent. Where then, cry I to both these antagonists, is the subject of your dispute? The theist allows that the original intelligence is very different from human reason: The atheist allows that the original principle of order bears some remote analogy to it."

(DCNR part 12 para 7)

HUME ON NATURAL RELIGION

- So Hume thinks he has deconstructed natural religion in two (related) ways.
 - ***First***, the analogy between whatever it is that caused the universe to exist and a human mind is weakened to the point where there is no substantive difference with atheism.
 - ***Second***, natural religion provides no basis whatsoever for reasoning from the created world to any *moral* attributes in the ultimate cause of the world. (*Remember the problem of evil!* There Hume suggested that, while the evil in the world may be *consistent* with an omnibenevolent God, natural religion alone will never be able to *justify an inference* from the nature of the observed world to the conclusion that the ultimate cause is in fact benevolent.)
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DOES THE PROJECT OF NATURAL RELIGION OVERREACH OUR CAPACITIES?

- Hume's ultimate diagnosis is that natural religion—the attempt to establish ultimate religious truths purely by the exercise of philosophical reason and scientific argument—simply outreaches our feeble human capacities.
 - In the end, Hume recommends *“the limitation of our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding.”* Careful reasoners *“will never be tempted to go beyond common life, so long as they consider the imperfection of the faculties they employ, their narrow reach, and their inaccurate operation. While we cannot give a satisfactory reason, why we believe, after a thousand experiments, that a stone will fall, or fire burn; can we ever satisfy ourselves concerning any determination, which we may form, with regard to the origin of worlds, and the situation of nature, from, and to eternity?”*
(Hume, ECHU section 12, para 25)
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